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ABSTRACT

Elementary-grade reading materials produced in the Navajo language were evaluated at a teacher's conference held in Gallup, New Mexico, on April 28-29, 1972. Participants, mostly teachers, at the conference numbered approximately 45. The 5 texts evaluated were "Mosilgai" (School Cat), "Jasper," Pabii Doo Masi" (Puppy and Cat), "Da'iida" (Eat), and "Hastoi Taa." Each of the books was discussed in detail by the authors, who presented the rationale behind their work, and then by conference participants, many of whom had familiarized themselves with the books through classroom use. Criticisms were presented not so much in terms of text revision, but rather in terms of future materials preparation. Also discussed were the relationship between spelling and dialect, the possibility of alternate readers, and better fit for different dialect areas; but the discussion remained unresolved. In addition, some objections to the size of the print, essentially 12 point IBM Directory type, were discussed. It was generally agreed that for beginning readers the type size should be larger (36 point), with reduction to take place in higher level readers. (FF)

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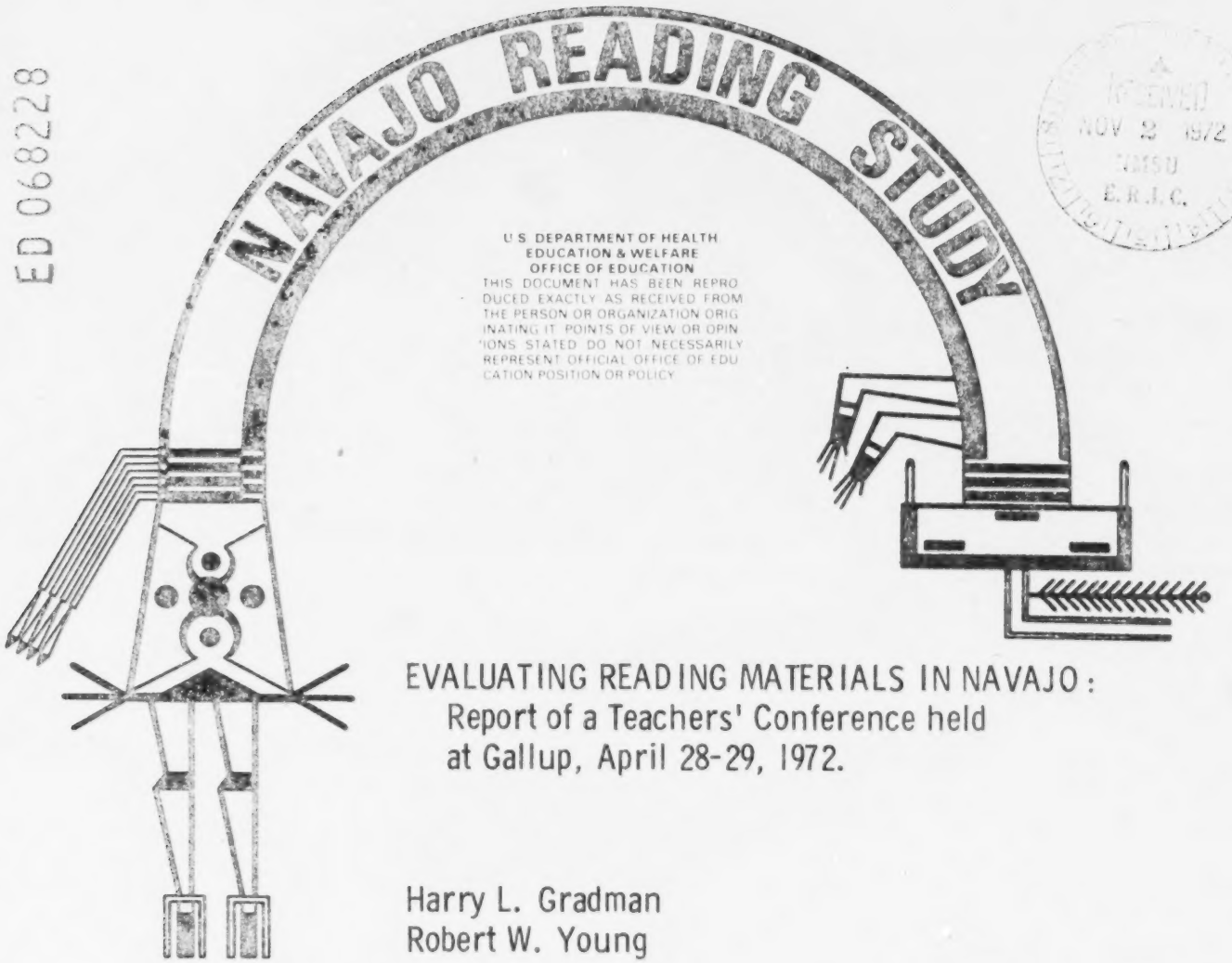

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EVALUATING READING MATERIALS IN NAVAJO: Report of a Teachers' Conference held at Gallup, April 28-29, 1972.

Harry L. Gradman
Robert W. Young

Navajo Reading Study Progress Report No. 18
The University of New Mexico, May 1972

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NAVAJO READING STUDY

The University of New Mexico

May 1972

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Called to order at 1:30 P.M., April 28, some forty-five participants at the conference on reading materials were welcomed by Dr. Robert W. Young, Acting Director of the Navajo Reading Study. Dr. Young introduced members of the Navajo Reading Study staff and then presented background information on the history of Navajo literacy projects. Concluding his introductory remarks with a discussion of such projects today, Dr. Young stressed the approach followed by the Navajo Reading Study: the preparation of materials by native speakers of Navajo.

Dr. Harry L. Gradman, Co-director of the Navajo Reading Study, outlined the goals of the Friday afternoon meeting, the primary one of which was the evaluation of pilot reading materials produced by the Study. Each book was to be discussed in detail, first by the authors, presenting the rationale behind their work, and then by the conference participants, many of whom had familiarized themselves with the books through classroom use. Of particular interest were constructive criticisms, not so much in terms of text revision, but rather of future materials preparation.

The first book discussed was Marlene Atcitty's Mósíłgai, the story of an adventurous cat going to school. Ms. Atcitty was especially concerned with the following questions: Are young children interested in the fantasy nature of animals going to school? Is the content level appropriate for beginning readers? Is there too much narrative on each page? Is the book appropriate in size (from all points of view)? Is the printing quality adequate?

A rather lively discussion ensued. There was immediate disagreement as to the content of Mósíłgai. One participant was disturbed by the lack of reality in the story. Cats do not go to school, nor do they ride on the backs of horses, as presented in the book's illustrations. On the other hand, the comment was made by several participants that young children do, in fact, like fairy tales, and that the book was desirable on those grounds. When the book was used at a grade level higher than elementary, students did not find it appealing. It was suggested that perhaps more traditional topics might be incorporated into the materials, possibly centering on activities in the home.

There was a good deal of disagreement as to the division of syllables. One teacher related the story of an eight-year-old student who couldn't understand why the words had spaces between the syllables since he didn't talk

that way. Another teacher responded, however, that she could personally read materials better if there was some type of spacing between syllables. The suggestion was made that perhaps syllables could be divided with hyphens, maintaining space separation for words alone. It was additionally suggested that materials for a more advanced level not contain words with syllable division. Put to the test of a vote, the results were inconclusive. While four more people favored syllable division than lack of division, the numbers were quite close. It was decided that the question would be raised again on the second day of the meetings, after participants had more time to consider the issue.

The question of dialect was also brought up. There were some objections raised as to the spelling of the word cat (mósí or másí). The broader question of the relationship between spelling and dialect was considered, along with the possibility of alternate readers, better fit for different dialect areas, but the discussion remained unresolved.

Finally, some objections were raised to the size of the print, essentially 12 point IBM Directory type. It was generally agreed that for beginning readers the type

size should be larger (36 point), with reduction to take place in higher level readers.

The attention of the group was then shifted to Irene Silentman's Jasper, a book quite different from Mósíχgai, in both content, size, and paper quality. The general sentiment seemed to be that children and teachers alike particularly liked Jasper, though it was a bit too short. On the other hand, a number of participants thought a series of books with Jasper as the main character might be in order. Jasper could, beyond his ball playing, go swimming, go to town, and so forth. It was noted that there were only seven different words in the text of Jasper, though the additional observation was made that for a first reader, younger children received a feeling of accomplishment at being able to complete the book in a relatively short amount of time. In addition to the suggestion that there might be a series of Jasper books, the suggestion was made that the level of difficulty might increase so that they could be used in succeeding years with the same group of students. An alternate suggestion was made that Jasper might be a chapter in a larger book about Jasper's activities on and off of the reservation.

The name of the principal character, Jasper, was both praised and criticized. Though objections were raised

on the basis that Jasper was not, strictly speaking, a Navajo name and that its pronunciation was not in keeping with Navajo phonology, there was the report of a teacher who had a student named Jasper in her class; and he was quite impressed that there was a book which had his name on it. When the conference participants were asked to suggest names that might be more appropriate, about the only thing agreed upon was that there were too many Kii and Laa' stories, and perhaps the names of characters did not matter too much.

The comments about the graphic work in Jasper were almost as varied. While one participant felt that Jasper looked "too hard," that is not "boyish" enough, opposite sentiments were expressed too. There was general agreement that the heavier weight of paper used in Jasper or Hastóí Táá' was preferable to that in Mósí łgai. It was also suggested that the book was physically too small. A preferred size was that of Hastóí Táá' by Judy Harvey. One participant even suggested that it would be nice if transparencies were sent along with each book and that the books should be appropriate in size for overhead projectors.

Judy Harvey's Pábii Dóó Másí was the next book considered. The attention of the group remained fixed on

the question of graphics, as this was the only book printed in colors (three). There was general agreement that the color characteristics of the book were extremely desirable. At this point, Caryl McHarney, illustrator for all of the books done thus far, commented that a book with color costs roughly four times that of a book done simply in black-and-white. The sentiment of the conference participants appeared to be that color was not so important as to impair the quantity of books produced. The hope was expressed that a less expensive way might be found to produce books in color.

Fifteen posters were also included with Pábii Dóó Másí. There was unanimous agreement that the posters were a good idea, and there were a number of suggestions for different kinds of posters and charts that might be useful for teachers, a topic to which conference participants returned the second day.

Caryl McHarney took some additional time to explain to the participants the thinking behind her graphic work. Emphasis was placed upon simplicity so as not to detract from the printed words on each page. It was also pointed out that each illustration was done in such a manner that the eyes of the reader were directed to the statement illustrated. Mrs. McHarney showed examples of graphic principles in her illustrations for the Study.

Returning briefly to the question of dialect differences, Dr. William Morgan posed a question to the Navajo speaking participants regarding their use of the verb stems -bąąs/-máás. The first of these choices expresses the concept "move by rolling" with reference to a hoop-like object, while the second term expresses the same concept with reference to a spherical object. In Mósí*χ*gai the rolling movement of a tire had been expressed with the stem -bąąs, and some native speakers had insisted that -máás should have been used. A vote was taken, with the result that 19 persons preferred to class a tire as a spherical object while 6, including the author of Mósí*χ*gai preferred to class it as a hoop-like object.

This disagreement, reflecting regional usage, is a good example of dialect differences that need to be taken into account in the production of reading and teaching materials. The application of classifying verb stems will be given special attention in carrying out dialect studies.

The proceedings were recessed briefly before the continuation of the discussions.

Marlene Atcitty resumed the continuation of text discussions with her Da'iidą́. The focus of the group appeared to remain on the illustrations, which served as stimulus for related topics. There was general

agreement that the subject matter of the book, eating, was good, though there remained a question as to whether or not the pictures on each page clearly reflected what was conveyed in the sentences. As an example, the first page states that "My mother is eating" (Shimá ayą́), though the picture is that of a woman specifically eating a cob of corn. Again, as in the case of "roll," Navajo utilizes a number of classifying verb stems (six, to be precise) with reference to the "chewing" -- and by extension the "eating" -- of objects, plus an additional stem that expresses "eat" in general terms (ingest). In Da'iidą́, "eat" was expressed by the general stem -yą́, although the woman was specifically eating an ear of corn -- an object class expressed by the stem -aaɣ. It was suggested that a better way of illustrating the sentence would be to show an assortment of food so as not to confuse the particular class item pictured (corn) with the general class of activity stated (eating). In this connection, it was suggested that a future book might be developed with classification of objects chewed/eaten as the central theme.

The question of "cultural mix" was raised in terms of the illustrations. The father, for instance, is pictured wearing a hard hat, though the mother is presented

in more traditional apparel. The response of the participants was varied. One observer felt that the father was too unusual looking, though another responded that he looked exactly like many of her students' fathers who worked on construction projects. There was, in fact, some agreement that the mixture of traditional Navajo culture with Anglo culture was desirable in both story content and illustrations.

At this point the more general discussion of graphics continued. It was suggested that perhaps more abstract pictures might be a reasonable alternative for children's books. The question was raised as to whether or not real photographs might be substituted for illustrations, though Mrs. McHarney suggested that the cost might be prohibitive. It was also suggested that the children might well be asked what they like.

Two further suggestions which arose during the discussion of Ms. Atcitty's work were first that all of the stories produced by the Navajo Reading Study could profit from greater attention to introducing and concluding the content, and second that perhaps the Study might give thought to preparing "teacher's guides" to go along with the materials. Teacher's guides could not only clearly define the point of the texts, but they also might con-

tain suggestions as to how the materials might be used for expanded exercises that the teachers themselves might undertake.

The final text discussed on the first day of the conference was Judy Harvey's Hastóí Táá'. Ms. Harvey was most interested in whether or not teachers thought she had succeeded in her primary goal: turning a joke into a short story. The reaction was, predictably, mixed. The idea in general of jokes or riddles serving as the basis for stories was favorably received, though there was some question as to whether or not Ms. Harvey had succeeded. It was pointed out that the mood had to be set before readers approached the book; and even after that, there was some question as to whether or not children thought the story was funny. When tried with adults, however, it was reported that the story was a great success. It was stressed that while the notion of jokes and riddles was a good one, care should be taken for Navajo topics to be employed, and the material should be within the experience of the child.

The general discussion turned more specifically to the topic of book content, before adjourning. Irene Silentman mentioned that she was presently engaged in the preparation of a book on traditional Navajo foods, intended for

a level higher than first. It was suggested to her that she might include information on where the food came from, and how it was stored during the year. One participant added that Ms. Silentman might portray an elderly woman with her young granddaughter walking along, telling stories while they tend their sheep. They could come across various items during their walk, and stories could be told about each of the items they encounter. Even the times could be contrasted, along with a healthy mixture of narrative and dialogue.

The conference was adjourned shortly before 5:00 P.M. with a call for assembly at 9:00 A.M., Saturday.

The second day's proceedings were handled somewhat differently from those of the first. Participants broke up into four relatively small groups, each with a representative of the Navajo Reading Study, to discuss particular reading material needs. After a long hour of sometimes animated discussion, all participants reassembled to discuss together the specific problems brought up in the smaller groups.

Irene Silentman represented the first group which concluded, among other things, that children like to deal with natural objects, things that grow and are easily found out-of-doors. Perhaps charts, such as those that

were used to accompany Pábii Dóó Másí, might be made to reflect such interests. A suggestion was made that children might be asked to gather plants and bring them to school. If appropriate materials were available to go along with this type of "field work," a better way might have been found for the presentation of concepts, objects, and so forth. Other suggestions from the first group included a re-emphasis upon the notion that traditional topics would be nice for reading materials, children's drawings and their own experiences -- perhaps a trip to the zoo somewhere. Finally, mention was made of controlled linguistic readers. Would it be possible to have materials which included, for instance, a limited number of sounds? The second group also had something to say about linguistically controlled readers. They suggested that a story might be concentrated around one particular sound. Perhaps a baby's first laugh might be the subject of a story. Other topics were suggested too: days of the week, songs, the five senses, clan history and interrelationships, place names, even comic type characters. The group also suggested that charts might be made for books that are already available from the Reading Study.

It was generally agreed that reading materials should be designed so that they could serve other purposes

along with the teaching of reading. In terms of science, for example, in addition to some of the suggestions that were made earlier about plants and animals, a reader could well be designed that would inform children about the parts of the body, both internal and external. Furthermore, readers could be designed to explain to the child how he, individually, was affected by the tribal council, the local chapter, the police, and so forth. Further, sports might be the topic of a reader, particularly concentrating on popular activities in this area: wrestling and the rodeo.

It was also suggested that the Navajo Reading Study send along questionnaires with each of the reading materials so that teachers could respond to the books as soon as they had finished using them and hence the Study might have an early idea of strengths and weaknesses of the materials. An additional idea was that on the last page of the texts, where word frequencies are usually listed, a translation into English of Navajo words might be in order. Finally, it was pointed out that larger (paper size) books seem to be better for younger children; hard covers are preferable on books; and even coloring books might be a useful project for the Study. A suggestion was offered along the lines of having materials for teaching the alphabet such that students might fill in dotted

lines already printed on each page.

The third group had many suggestions similar to those of the other groups. The size of a book such as Hastóí Táá' was considered to be good, though book size could easily be reduced for later books at a more advanced level. There was general agreement that syllable division should be maintained in early readers. Posters should be continued, and the additional suggestion was made that each poster might contain a sound with a picture reflective of that sound. A series of books could follow through basic sound development in Navajo; puns might be included; and Navajo "scrabble" might be considered, too.

Additional suggestions included stories translated into Navajo for older people, fantasy stories translated into Navajo, animal books (both zoo animals and local fauna), bird books, Navajo tongue twisters, records and tapes, and card games. It was also thought that workbooks might be an interesting idea to incorporate into reading materials, particularly in terms of vocabulary development potential.

The fourth group offered the suggestion that at least book covers be in color, if not the entire book. It was pointed out that black-and-white covers get especially dirty rather quickly. Also, there should be more space

between lines in the actual printing. Mósí Ygai was cited as an example of a book with the printing too close together. Instructions should be sent along with each book suggesting activities for teachers to participate in. Book pages should also be numbered. Furthermore, the Reading Study should encourage Navajo teachers to submit materials that they themselves have created for the classroom, and good materials should be printed by the Study, regardless of the source.

There was a quite apparent need for more books of a "middle" level. Books produced thus far were considered to be very easy and too short for much classroom activity. Once again, animals seemed to be a favorite topic, but with the additional suggestion that more narrative stories be created instead of the stories of the type "This is a racoon, this is a coyote, etc." Also, a map or beginning geography book might be in order to explain the reservation to the children. It was also suggested that the ceremonial calendar and historical information might serve as the bases for independent reading materials.

The general discussion then switched to the notion of some type of magazine or newsletter that could appear on a regular basis, directed at the elementary level. Though it would be difficult initially to expect a greater

than monthly frequency, ideas were abundant for content. Not only could news items be presented to children, but also pictures and drawing activities could be used. Various people on the reservation could be asked for contributions, and possibly Dr. Morgan could serve as the editor. The level of enthusiasm was high for this project, though the Navajo Reading Study itself would not maintain prime responsibility for the project.

As the discussion came to a close, the suggestion was made that perhaps at the next teachers' meeting people bring samples of their own creative work so that all interested persons could see what was going on in different places and from a variety of points of view. In other words, it was hoped that at a future meeting, people could get together and share some of their own ideas without, perhaps, the focus of specific materials produced by the Study. The sentiment remained strong that it was important for both teachers and materials producers to get together on a regular basis to discuss their collective needs. Both Dr. Young and Dr. Gradman expressed the profound thanks of the Navajo Reading Study to the participants who had generously given of their time and thoughts for such a productive exchange, and at noon the conference was adjourned.

PARTICIPANTS

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